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ABSTRACT

In an effort to standardize the definition of the two-year college student transfer rate and to collect national transfer data, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC) has solicited data annually since 1989 from a sample of 240 public and private two-year colleges nationwide. The CSCC has standardized the definition of "transfer rate" as meaning all students entering a two-year college in a given year who have no prior college experience and who complete at least 12 college credit units within 4 years divided by the number of that group who take one or more classes at a university within 4 years. In 1991, data on the 1986 entering two-year college student cohorts were provided by 40 colleges in California, 39 colleges in Illinois, and 29 colleges in Texas. For these states, the percentage of students earning at least 12 credits within 4 years was 44.3%, 47.1%, and 56.2%, respectively, while the calculated transfer rates were 20.8%, 21.5%, and 28.2%, respectively. The differences in transfer activity among the three states may be linked to the following factors: (1) California's community college tuition is lower than it is in both Texas and Illinois, making the move to a four-year institution a major cost increase for California students; (2) both Texas and Illinois have upper-division institutions that are designed to take community college transfers at the junior level; and (3) the University of California requires two-year college students to complete 56 units before transferring, and the California State University requires 30 community college units, while public universities in Illinois and Texas allow students to transfer at any time. Nine recommendations for increasing transfer rates are included. (PAA)

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Arthur M. Cohen

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How many students transfer? Although the technology for tracking students on a statewide basis has been available for decades, few states have built integrated systems by means of which students moving between institutions or between sectors could be monitored. Several factors have impeded the development of this capacity: a tradition of independence among individual colleges and universities; the growth of separately organized, funded, and managed sectors within higher education; and a prevalent attitude of indifference regarding students who are not at that time enrolled at the institution being asked to provide the data. Compounding these factors is the fear among some college administrators that transfer rates calculated according to a uniform definition may be used to make odious comparisons between institutions.

At the same time, calls for institutional accountability that have occurred with increasing frequency in legislatures across the nation have led to student tracking capacities in some states. The leaders in effecting these integrated data systems have been the states where higher education is closely coordinated at the state agency level: Illinois, Kentucky, Washington, and Texas, to name a few. However, where there is somewhat less state-level coordination, student tracking systems are inchoate: included among these are Kansas, Idaho, Mississippi, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. In all, approximately one-third of the states now have the capacity for tracking students in the public higher education sector and among institutions within the sectors.

But data capabilities are only part of the problem. To date, the higher education sectors have not agreed on a standard definition for calculating transfer rates. Who shall be included in the pool of potential transfers? All community college students? Only those

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students intending to transfer? Full-time students only? Students just out of high school? Students eligible for university entry as freshmen? A second issue of definition centers on the time to be considered between a student's entry and transfer. Few students matriculate at community colleges and progress full-time through the first two years of collegiate studies and enter the university at the junior level in their third year out of high school. The time between college entry and transfer to the university may stretch indefinitely as students drop in and drop out, attend part-time, and take courses that may or may not qualify for university transfer credit. Shall we count only those students who transfer within four or five years? Or shall we keep the books open indefinitely?

For the past three years, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC) has coordinated the Transfer Assembly, a group of colleges and state agencies across the nation that is concerned with transfer data and definitions. After convening several conferences and participating in several more, and after interacting with numerous practitioners, the CSCC staff standardized the definition of "transfer rate" as all students entering a two-year college in a given year who have no prior college experience and who complete at least 12 college credit units within four years, divided into the number of that group who take one or more classes at a university within four years.

TRANSFER RATES: DATA

In the process of stabilizing the definition, CSCC has solicited data annually since 1989 from a sample of 240 of the nation's public and private community colleges. As noted in Table One, the number of colleges supplying data grew each year, so that by the last reported year, 155 of the 1,050 public two-year institutions in the nation were participating.

TABLE ONE

Center for the Study of Community Colleges Transfer Assembly

National Transfer Data 1984–1986

Entrants with No Prior College Experience		
1984	48 colleges	N= 77,903
1985	114 colleges	N=191,748
1986	155 colleges	N=267,150
Entrants Receiving 12+ Credits Within Four Years		
1984	39,351	50.5%
1985	89,638	46.7%
1986	124,885	46.7%
Transfers Within Four Years		
1984	9,316	23.7%
1985	21,171	23.6%
1986	29,180	23.4%

In each case, data were collected on the cohort of students entering college for the first time in the given year and calculations were made to determine the number of that entering cohort that received at least 12 college credits at the community college, divided into the number of the group who had matriculated at one of the state's public universities within the ensuing four years. Because of the larger samples and the continued effort to obtain more consistent data, the last year should be considered the most reliable.

The data collected from Illinois, Texas, and California, the nation's top three states in number of community college students, are particularly noteworthy. (See Table Two.) Each of the three states provided the data in a slightly different way. In Illinois, the Illinois Community College Board collected data from the participating community colleges and arranged to have those data matched with student data the universities had submitted to the Illinois Board of Higher Education.

In Texas, the public institutions are linked through the Texas State Coordinating Board. There, the state agency information specialists collected data on students who entered and completed 12 units from the community colleges that chose to participate and matched them with the state university data files.

In California, the CSCC staff solicited data on students entering and completing 12 units from each of the state's 107 community colleges. Specifications for arraying the data on disks were sent to the 49 colleges that agreed to participate. CSCC then contracted with California State University (CSU) to take the disks that the community colleges sent and match them against the CSU systemwide records for the four years following the date that the cohort entered. The CSCC obtained a student-record tape from the University of California system for the given years and matched the disks with those data. The CSU and University of California (UC) data then were merged to yield the statewide public institution transfer rate.

TABLE TWO

California, Illinois, and Texas Data-1986

	California	Illinois	Texas
Colleges	N=49	N=39	N=29
Entrants(E)	135,806	46,106	34,825
12 Credits or More(C)	60,160 (C/E=44.3%)	21,700 (C/E=47.1%)	19,586 (C/E=56.2%)
Transfers(TR)	12,518 (TR=20.8%)	5,246 (TR=21.5%)	5,527 (TR=28.2%)

WHY THE DIFFERENCE IN TRANSFER ACTIVITY AMONG STATES?

The ratio of students receiving at least 12 credits at a community college within four years—44.3 percent of the entrants in California, 47.1 percent in Illinois, and 56.2 percent in Texas—and the difference in transfer rates—20.8 percent for California, 21.5 percent for Illinois, and 28.2 percent for Texas—point to some intriguing questions. Why should the patterns be similar in California and Illinois but different for Texas? A single college may have characteristics militating against transfer—lack of proximity to any university campus, for example, or a student body comprising primarily low-income people. But what accounts for the similarities and differences among states?

Clues are often sought by viewing the differences in student demographics, college admissions policies, and on-campus incentives.

- Demographic characteristics of the students in the three states include an ethnic minority enrollment in California community colleges accounting for 35 percent of the total student body; in Texas it is 32 percent; and in Illinois it is 27 percent. This does not seem to be an explanatory factor, especially because the differences in transfer rates by ethnicity were greater for the sample as a whole than they were for the students within each college. For example, one college's transfer rates were 12.7 percent for its black students, 11.3 percent for its Hispanics, and 13.8 percent for its whites, whereas in another college, the transfer rates were 20.0 percent for blacks, 19.9 percent for Hispanics, and 19.8 percent for whites. Thus, the aggregate data make it appear as though the colleges pass the ethnic groups through at differing rates. However, this effect is caused by variations among the colleges. Whether a college has a high or low transfer rate overall, it typically has a similar transfer rate for all its students. Students of any ethnic category tend to go through any single college at the same rate.

- All three states have open admissions policies: any student who is at least 18 years old and/or who possesses a high school or G.E.D. diploma may enroll in a community college.

- All three states require that students take a placement examination: the ACT or another nationally normed test in Illinois, the Texas Academic Skills Program in Texas, and an examination mandated by the local institution in California. These tests are used not to limit enrollment, but to help staff advise students as to the level of courses that they may take and the type of programs they may enter.

- All three states have common course numbering systems, general education compacts, articulation agreements, and special transfer incentive activities.

None of the foregoing characteristics of the systems seems sufficiently persuasive to account for the disparities in student achievement. The differences in the ratio of students receiving 12 or more units and in the percentage who transfer seem more likely to relate to other factors: differences in expenditures, the structure of each state's higher education system, and general expectations regarding access and student flow.

Funding for the colleges is disparate. Education and general expenditures per full-time equivalent (FTE) community college student in 1986-87 were $3,920 in California, $3,646 in Illinois, and $4,264 in Texas. The average annual salary for a full-time instructor was $37,266 in California, $34,067 in Illinois, and $29,972 in Texas (National Center for Education Statistics, 1991b). Texas colleges may be devoting more funds to student support services outside the classroom, but the way that expenditures are calculated does not make for feasible comparisons.

Student fees differ. For the years 1986 to 1990, tuition for a full-time in-state student in California was approximately $112 to $137 per annum. Comparable figures in Illinois were $871 to $960 and in Texas, $300 to $455. (National Center for Education Statistics, 1991a). A student may attend college in California at a considerably lower price, a characteristic enhancing open access. But the minuscule tuition in California allows students to wander in and out of the community colleges, to leave without completing any courses, and to return with practically no fiscal penalty. A student may take a course at a low price merely for personal interest; signing up for a college-credit physical education class makes the college's swimming pool and weight room available for less than the cost of a private health club. California probably has a higher proportion of casual, non-degree-oriented students than any other state.* That might account in large measure for the low ratio of students completing as few as four courses in four years.

The difference between community college and university fees may also play a part. The California community college fees are one-tenth of university tuition; a student transferring from one to the other faces a major cost increase. However, in Texas, university fees average only $300 more per year than those at the community colleges.

The lower transfer rate in California may be related to the higher education system's structure. Both Illinois and Texas have upper-division universities that are designed to take community college transfers at the junior level: Illinois has two such universities and Texas has eight.

The systems' policies also affect transfer rates. A student who enters a community college in Illinois or Texas may transfer to a public university at any time; no minimum number of credits is required; the students wishing to transfer apply to their university of choice and have their course work evaluated for acceptance. In California, the student who starts at a community college may not transfer to UC until completing 56 units, essentially two years of full-time study. And CSU has recently increased its transfer requirements from 12 to 30 community college units for students who were not eligible for entrance as freshmen. These policies severely limit student flow between the sectors.

AUGMENTING AND STRENGTHENING TRANSFER

Every state has some sort of policy on transfer of credits, but the stringency varies greatly. Some states have agreements calling for transferability of all courses, others specify a general education core, and others are merely generalized statements regarding the desirability of credit transfer. Some states have state-level agencies to deal solely with problems of articulation and transfer. In general, legislative mandates and resolutions, state-level planning and coordinating agencies and committees, and various segmental and intersegmental coordinating bodies operate to monitor the flow of students. At the institutional level, faculty-to-faculty articulation activities, concurrent enrollment in more than one institution, guaranteed admissions at the senior institution, and various types of student services, including testing, placement, and advising, function to smooth the process.

* Curriculum analyses support this contention. Whereas 19.1 percent of the non-liberal arts enrollments in American community colleges is comprised of personal skills courses (physical education, parenting, career and life planning, etc.), those enrollments account for 26.5 percent of the non-liberal arts in California.

The key question in examining transfer rates and state policies affecting them is, "Is it in the state's interest to have more students transfer from community colleges to universities?" If so, then several actions can be taken.

❖ The colleges and universities could:

- Design and administer subject-area examinations to samples of all students enrolled in for-credit classes so that estimates can be made of student knowledge in particular disciplines that can be shared between institutions;
- Beginning with the programs from which most students transfer, appoint college faculty to university faculty committees so that curriculum and concurrent enrollment for students can be articulated;
- Send lists annually to neighboring university campuses reporting pertinent data about students who will be eligible for transfer and who choose to be included;
- Whenever feasible, schedule second-tier, sophomore-level classes on a neighboring university's campus;
- Make more on-campus employment opportunities available to community college students so that they become more involved with the institution outside the classroom.

❖ A major impetus to transfer could be effected if the colleges and universities:

- Demanded the associate degree before a community college student would be eligible for admission at a university;
- Gave full credit toward the baccalaureate for up to 60 units of college-level study completed with a minimum grade;
- Modified their junior-class admission requirements by giving community colleges the responsibility for maintaining appropriate curriculum patterns, thus recognizing the associate degree as a full-faith ticket of admission to the university;
- Guaranteed a place in the junior class for all students who met the criteria.

A second impetus to transfer would appear if the legislature provided supplemental funds to any college that increased its rate of transfer beyond the baseline percentage derived from its prior years' rate. This would stimulate transfer-related activities at the college and, not least, demand accurate records and annual reports of transfer rates calculated according to a uniform standard. Reliable estimates of college contributions can be made only if valid, readily understandable data are put forward routinely.

SUMMARY

The concept of calculating transfer rates, as well as assessing other institutional outcomes, will become more prominent in the coming years. Regardless of whether the "Student-Right-to-Know Act" survives a change in federal administration, and whether a few state legislatures tire of attempting to persuade their higher education agencies to provide data on student progress, some form of accounting for institutional effects seems destined to be built into the funds that colleges receive. Nor will current fiscal shortfalls soon be reversed. The colleges that invite everyone to attend will find the states increasingly reluctant to fund them on the criterion of open access. Calculating transfer rates is only one of the numerous outcome measures that colleges will be expected to provide. The method described in this paper can serve as a model for deriving figures on the college's other functions.

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